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ABSTRACT

Studies of agenda setting, which asserts that audiences note what is emphasized in the news media and incorporate a similar set of emphases into their personal agendas, are reviewed in this essay. Separate sections consider early empirical evidence in support of the concept; contingent conditions; differing effects of newspapers and television; models of the process; salience of attributes of a topic, issue, or person; domains for research; theory construction and testing; and appropriate research strategies. (AA)

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Agenda-Setting Research

A bibliographic essay

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Agenda-setting asserts that audiences take note of the saliences of the news media, note what is emphasized, what receives heavy play, and incorporate a similar set of weights into their persoanl agendas. While the production of these saliences is largely a by-product of journalism practice and tradition, they nevertheless are attributes of the messages transmitted to the audience. And, asserts the idea of agenda-setting, they are among the most important message attributes transmitted to the audience.

This notion of an agenda-setting function of the mass media is a relational concept specifying a strong positive relationship between the emphases of mass communication and the salience of these topics to the individuals in the audience. This concept is stated in causal terms: increased salience of a topic or issue in the mass media influences (causes) the salience of that topic or issue among the public. Not only does the press bring these issues to a level of political awareness among the public. Agenda-setting asserts that the priorities of the press to some degree become the priorities of the public. What the press emphasizes is in turn emphasized privately and publicly by the audiences of the press.

Empirical Evidence of Agenda-Setting

Many have asserted an agenda-setting function of the press. In his book Public Opinion, Walter Lippmann (1922) long ago eloquently described the necessary connection between mass communication and individual political cognitions. But

like much of our folk wisdom about politics and human behavior, it was not put to empirical test for over half a century.

The first attempt at empirical verification of agenda-setting was carried by McCombs and Shaw (1972) during the 1968 U. S. Presidential election. Among undecided voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina there were substantial correlations between the political issues emphasized in the news media and what the voters regarded as the key issues in that election. Interestingly, the voters' beliefs about what were the major issues facing the country reflected the composite of the press coverage, even though the three Presidential contenders in 1968 placed widely divergent emphasis on the issues. This suggests that voters--at least, undecided voters--pay some attention to all the political news in the press regardless of whether it is about, or originated with, a favored candidate.

In fact, further analysis of the 1968 Chapel Hill survey showed that among those undecided voters with leanings toward one of the three candidates, there was less agreement with the news agenda based on their preferred candidate's statements than with the news agenda based on all three candidates.

Although the 1968 Chapel Hill study was the first empirical investigation couched specifically in terms of agenda-setting, there is other empirical evidence in the mass communication/political behavior literature which can be interpreted in agenda-setting terms. Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee (1954) found that Elmira voters with minimal interpersonal contacts were more in line with the national trend toward Truman that occurred and was reported in the news during the 1948 presidential campaign. In a study of an Iowa reapportionment referendum Arnold and Gold (1964) found their hypothesis that counties would vote their self-interest (a strong correlation between county population and proportion of votes for reappor-

tionment) was most strongly supported where agenda-setting agencies--local newspapers and organized committees supporting reapportionment--had made the issue salient to voters. A similar necessary condition role for agenda-setting was found in Donohue, Tichenor, and Olien's (1975) study of the distribution of knowledge among populations where there was a monotonic relationship between mass media coverage of issues and the strength of the education/knowledge correlation. Nor is the role of the press in these various agenda-setting situations limited to that of a conduit for the interests and assertions of news sources. Funkhouser's (1973) study of the major issues of the 1960s found a strong correlation between press coverage and national public opinion, but little correlation between either of these agendas and objective indicators of the actual situations. Both press coverage and public concern about Vietnam, campus unrest, and urban riots, for example, peaked a year or two earlier than did the actual situations themselves.

Organizing the Studies

Beyond establishing an empirical link between the day-to-day coverage of the mass media and what individuals consider important, the proliferation of recent research also has introduced important new conceptual distinctions and attacked key methodological problems. To achieve an overview of these advances this review of the literature has been organized under seven broad headings.

Contingent Conditions

No one contends that agenda-setting is an influence process operating at all times and all places on all people. One psychological concept which begins to explain individual variation in attention to mass communication is need for orientation (McCombs, 1967), a psychological variable postulating an inherent curiosity about the surrounding environment.

Using data collected from a large sample of Charlotte, North Carolina voters during the 1972 Presidential campaign, McCombs and Weaver (1973) and Weaver (1976), found that extensive use of mass communication to follow the campaign increased with the strength of need for orientation. The greater the need for orientation, the greater use made of mass communication to learn about the campaign, candidates, and issues. Similarly, the higher the need for orientation, the higher the correlation between the voters' agenda of key issues and the television agenda of public issues.

Tracing the effect of extensive media Watergate coverage from October 1972 until May 1973, Weaver, McCombs, and Spellman (1975) also found the major impact of this coverage among Charlotte voters with a high need for orientation. For these voters exposure to the heavy media coverage of Watergate led both to the increased salience of Watergate and increased interpersonal discussion. Frequency of interpersonal discussion itself mediates agenda-setting influence. However, the evidence is contradictory. McCombs, Shaw, and Shaw (1972) found that the agenda-setting relationship was strongest among Durham, North Carolina voters with a low level of interpersonal communication, while Mullins (1973) found that the agenda-setting relationship was strongest among college students with a high level of interpersonal discussion of politics.

Another contingent condition for the appearance of agenda-setting is high exposure to the mass media. Since the concept of agenda-setting asserts that individuals learn agendas from the mass media, it is reasonable to hypothesize better learning among those most exposed. Several small-scale studies conducted by McCombs, Shaw, and Shaw (1972) in North Carolina documented a positive relationship between amount of exposure to a news medium and the level of agreement with its agenda of public issues. This relationship has been replicated by Agnir (1976) using data from the Syracuse Sophomore Survey.

Causal Effects Across Time

Beyond specifying some of the conditions on which the appearance of agenda-setting is contingent, what evidence is there of a direct causal link between press coverage of issues and the public's agenda of issues? Tipton, Haney and Basehart's (1975) failure to find this causal evidence with a cross-lagged correlation analysis of panel data from a Kentucky gubernatorial campaign may well have resulted from use of an inappropriate time lag.

To determine the appropriate time lag and the cumulative impact of the press across time Stone (1976; also see McCombs and Schulte, 1975; McCombs, Becker and Weaver, 1975) content analysed media agendas for the six months prior to the field-work of two public opinion surveys. When the media agendas are systematically correlated with personal agendas, a striking pattern emerges. In general, the correlations rapidly rise was we move back in time from the interviewing dates to a period about two months earlier. Then from month two to month six prior to the interviewing there is only a slight increase in the correlations. Beyond six months prior to the interviewing, there is little correlation between press and personal agendas.

Using this knowledge of the time lag (and amount of cumulation) apparently involved in the agenda-setting process, McCombs (1976) examined the agenda-setting effects of the mass media on Charlotte, North Carolina voters during the 1972 presidential campaign. Using a panel design and cross-lagged correlation, he consistently found effects across time on voter agendas by newspapers. However, there was no evidence of a television effect across time, suggesting that the mass media medium used for public affairs information may be another major contingent condition for the appearance of agenda-setting.

Newspapers Vs. Television

One of the especially intriguing questions arising from agenda-setting research is the relative efficacy of television and newspapers in influencing personal agendas. The original McCombs and Shaw study found no significant differences between the influence of television and newspapers. But several later small-scale studies reported by McCombs, Shaw, and Shaw (1972) suggest that there may be differences under some conditions. In many instances, there were no differences at all in the strength of the agenda-setting correlations. But whenever there were differences, almost without exception, the correlations with voters' agendas were higher for newspapers than for television.

These findings were replicated in the 1972 Charlotte Voter Study where McCombs (1976) found strong effects across time for the local newspapers, but not for network television. The match between the newspaper agenda and voters' agenda also was stronger during the early part of the

campaign. However, television showed a better match with the voters' agenda in October. From this evidence McCombs concluded that newspapers and television play distinct roles in the shaping of the public agenda. Newspapers take the initial lead. But in the latter stages of public opinion formation newspapers share the stage, and television with its wide appeal seems to dominate. This latter stage of agenda-setting is clearly one of sharing rather than reinforcement, noted McCombs. His findings from the 1972 Presidential election essentially replicate those of the Tipton, Haney and Baschart (1975) study of a Kentucky gubernatorial campaign. While their evidence for the direction of effect was quite mixed, there were consistent strong correlations between the newspaper agendas and personal agendas. However, the correlations both across time and synchronously between television agendas and personal agendas were weak or even negative. This was the case even when the analysis was carried out separately for survey respondents who said they depended mainly on television for their political information.

Similar findings of an agenda-setting effect for newspapers, but not television, have been reported by McClure and Patterson (1974 and 1976) from their study of voters in Syracuse, New York during the 1972 Presidential campaign; by Mullins (1973) from his study of young voters on the University of North Carolina campus during the 1972 election; by Agnir (1976) from his study of Syracuse sophomores; and by Williams' (1975) study of Tallahassee broadcast audiences.

There are at least three potential explanations for these preliminary findings (McCombs and Bowers, 1976):

- o The uneven nature of the media competition in the city studied.
- o Demographic differences in the audiences for television and newspapers.
- o The nature of the medium itself.

Agenda-Setting Models

There are many ways to describe the agenda-setting process. The simplest version is the 0/1 or awareness model. Here the question is simply one of awareness versus ignorance. This basic, primitive notion of agenda-setting is a truism. If the media tell us nothing about a topic or event, then in most cases it simply will not exist on our personal agendas or in our life space.

But the concept of agenda-setting--especially as empirically developed--urges a more detailed model: 0/1/2...N, namely that among the many topics or attributes transmitted by the media, the same basic distinctions as to priorities will be transferred from the media agenda to the individual's agenda. More simply it amounts to this: we judge as important what the media judge important. The media's priorities become our own. This bolder hypothesis is the one emphasized in most of the research to date.

There is, of course, a very finite limit to how far this priorities model can be extended. Somewhere around five, six, or seven is the likely cutoff point for this 0/1/2...N model of agenda-setting. It is the magic number seven plus or minus two revisited (Miller, 1956).

Intermediate between the 0/1 awareness and the 0/1/2...N priorities model is an agenda-setting effect we might label salience. This is the 0/1/2 model. Heavy media emphasis on an issue or topic can move it into the top ranks of the personal agendas of the audience. This occurs only for a few items constantly emphasized in the media. A discrimination is made by the audience as to high and low importance items, but the exact priorities of the media are not reproduced within personal agendas.

Empirical comparisons of the salience and priorities models indicate that, overall, the more radical priorities model better describes the fit between voter agendas and press agendas (McCombs, 1976, using data from the 1972 Charlotte voter

study) and that the appropriate agenda-setting model for data analysis appears (Agnir, 1976) to interact with other theoretical variables, such as the distinction between intra-personal and inter-personal agendas.

Personal Agendas

The influence process described by the agenda-setting function can be conceptualized in either intra-personal or inter-personal terms (McLeod, Becker and Byrnes, 1974). The intra-personal agenda consists of those issues that each person considers personally most important while the inter-personal agenda consist of those issues that each person discusses most frequently with others. A comparison of the two agendas shows considerable, but far from perfect, overlap in the two agendas (McCombs, 1974). Agnir (1976) also found that the priorities model of agenda-setting held only for interpersonal agendas while the salience model correctly described both types of personal agendas. The exact fit of each type of personal agenda to the analysis models, medium used for public affairs information, etc. are major questions for future research.

Objects and Attributes

In addition to the salience of a topic, issue, or person, there is also the salience of their many attributes. To what extent is our view of a stimulus shaped or influenced by those attributes which the media deem newsworthy? Consideration of agenda-setting in terms of the corresponding saliences of both topics and attributes allows the concept to subsume similar ideas presented in the past. The concepts of status-conferral, stereotyping, and image-making all deal with the salience of stimuli and their attributes. (See McCombs and Shaw, 1974; McCombs and Bowers, 1976)

Two recent studies have documented the agenda-setting influence of the press on the perceived attributes of public issues as well as on the overall set of issues that are salient to voters. Cohen (1975) examined the attributes of a local environmental issue in Indiana, while Benton and Frazier (1975) studied the salient attributes of a national issue, the economy, among Minneapolis residents.

Specifically comparing the agenda-setting influence of television and newspapers, Benton and Frazier (1975) conceptualized three levels of agenda-setting. At level one where most agenda-setting research has focused is a set of broad issues. Levels two and three concern the attributes of this issue. The second level consisits of sub-issues, including specific problems, causes, and proposed solutions. At level three is specific information about these sub-issues, such as pro and con arguments for the proposed solutions or people and groups connected with the proposed solutions.

At both levels of the attributes of a major public issue, the economy, the newspaper sets the agenda for newspaper readers. Television did not influence the salience of attributes of the economic issue among television respondents, again pointing up the need for comparative media research on the learning process

involved in agenda-setting.

To date the research also has concentrated on public issues with little distinction among different types of issues. Agendas usually have been considered solely in terms of the "major" issues of the moment regardless of content. But public issues can be arrayed along numerous dimensions: local versus national, the personally-close versus the distant, emotional versus abstract, etc. It is not likely that the agenda-setting function of the mass media is concerned equally with all types of issues ceteris paribus. The salience of some types of issues on personal agendas are likely to show significant media influence while others show little or no such influence. Furthermore, interactions between types of issues and other agenda-setting variables are highly likely. A promising start in this direction is Sanders and Atwood's (1975) examination of changes in Illinois voters' cognitive maps during the 1972 campaign.

Even a cursory examination of the ebb and flow of different public opinion items in our recent history reveals great variation in the natural history of issues. Public concern over Vietnam built slowly over many years. Watergate took over six months to establish itself as a matter of great concern. Other issues like the energy crisis appear quite quickly on agendas. Distinctions among the types of issues -- and especially how public affairs topics come to be perceived as "issues" -- are key for spelling out the agenda-setting function of the mass media. (See Westley, 1976)

Domains for Research

Agenda-setting research, like political communication research generally, has concentrated on presidential elections. However, there are studies in other political communication areas which at least demonstrate the potential value of the agenda-setting concept in those settings. Tipton, Haney and Baschart (1975) have the only voter study not focusing on the national elections. While focusing his attention on the national elections, Bowers (1973 and 1976; also see Shaw and Bowers, 1973 and McCombs and Bowers, 1976) has concentrated on the agenda-setting influence of political advertising.

Several of the other studies cited above have used the agenda-setting concept for non-election studies of public opinion: Benton and Frazier's (1975) study of the economic issue; Cohen's (1975) study of a local environmental controversy; Martin's (1976) study of opinions toward Vietnam, drugs, and student unrest; and Mullins' (1973) study of public opinion among college students. In yet another political communication setting, Gormley (1975) examined the influence of newspaper agendas on North Carolina legislators; and in a qualitative fashion Cohen (1963) examined the reciprocal agenda-setting influence of key newsmakers and journalists in Washington. Finally, McCombs and Schulte (1975) have extended the concept to a number of international communication topics.

Concepts and Theories

In the four years since publication of the original McCombs and Shaw (1972) study there has been a proliferation of research. The basic relationship asserted by the concept of agenda-setting has been frequently replicated, and a host of new related concepts have been added to the political communication literature. I would term this the concept construction and testing phase of agenda-setting research. New concepts relevant to the basic idea of agenda-setting have been put forth and initial empirical evidence reported demostrating their ability to discriminate patterns of human behavior. For example, McCombs and Weaver (1973) conceptually linked psychological need for orientation to the agenda-setting process and demonstrated significant differences in media use and, to a lesser degree, agenda-setting influence of the media among voters differing in need for orientation. Like the vast majority of social science research the hard evidence remains at the level of bivariate statements. We can speculate about the existence of this theoretical sequence of variables:

Need for Orientation → Use of Mass Media → Match between Media & Personal Agendas.

But the evidence to date does not empirically assert this sequence. Of course, studies can be designed to yield three-variable statements.

But even three-variable statements fall short of moving us from concept construction and testing into full-fledged theory construction and testing. The distinct difference between the two can be succinctly described by the analogy of a jigsaw puzzle. Concepts represent the discrete pieces of the puzzle; bivariate and limited multi-variate statements are equivalent to a few pieces linked together. At best, scattered pieces hint at interesting patterns, but are far less than the full picture. A theory is the full picture, or at least the major portions of such a picture.

At the present time we clearly remain in the concept construction and testing phase of agenda-setting research. This is not so surprising. Agenda-setting is a very new concept in a young field of scholarship. Considering the short span of time involved, there has been a rich and rapid accumulation of concepts and empirical evidence. Furthermore, social science generally has not moved into the theory phase. These are only a handful of comprehensive behavioral theories in the literature with strong empirical backing. However, agenda-setting research promises to yield theoretical payoffs.

Research Strategies

In moving toward the theory construction and testing phase of agenda-setting research two very different strategies will prove to be important. These research strategies are:

- Matrix building approach

  and

- Hypothetico-Deductive approach.

While the hypothetico-deductive approach is the textbook model, the matrix-building approach is the modal behavioral pattern in social science research.

Continuing our earlier "need for orientation" example, imagine a 6 X 6 matrix defined by these six variables: level of need for orientation; level of mass communication exposure; nature of the personal agenda; intra/inter-personal; and mass medium used; television or newspapers. While the original example encompassed only three bivariate statements of relationship, our larger matrix incorporating the conceptual contributions reviewed above now encorporates 15 bivariate statements of relationship. For at least six of the bivariate statements specified by the matrix there is no empirical data at all! None of the multi-variate statements specified by the matrix have been examined empirically.

Since a theoretical description of the agenda-setting process (that is, a theory of agenda-setting as contrasted to the concept of agenda-setting) should encompass the full scope of concepts or variables defining the matrix and incorporate the significant relationships specified within the matrix, considerable empirical work remains to be done. Even at the bivariate level many of the relationships remain empirically unspecified, much less replicated. From the concepts and variables in the literature review above one could easily draw up a 10 X 10 matrix of the agenda-setting process. That would be 45 cells or pigeonholes to be filled in by empirical investigations. To date there are large numbers of empty cells or cells where only a single study can be cited as evidence.

Given the large number of yet empty cells (read "research opportunities") many scholars at varying levels of sophistication and with vastly different research interests can profitably add to the array of evidence on agenda-setting. It especially means an opportunity for young scholars with limited financial resources to contribute major pieces of empirical evidence. By zeroing in on a single unexplored cell, a tightly designed survey, for example, could map that cell with only a handful of questions.

Matrix building, the slow accretion of empirical evidence by numerous investigators in the modal pattern of mass communication research. But for those to whom the slowness of this strategy in arriving at a real theory of agenda-setting is frustrating, the classical hypothetico-deductive approach is recommended.

In this strategy the scholar assumes--on the basis of intuition, informed speculation about likely relationships, creative insight, or whatever--the basic outlines of a theory. The hypothetical relationships believed to be most important are asserted and put to empirical test. On a smaller scale the assertion and testing of bivariate hypotheses follows this same strategy. But many bivariate investigations do not (or can not) hypothesize precise relationships and settle for simply mapping what turns up.

While matrix building and the hypothetico-deductive method are similar (and perhaps identical in outcome) at the concept construction and testing phase, they are quite different in theory construction and testing. In place of the slow, albeit systematic, exploration of the matrix, the hypothetico-deductive approach

attempts to creatively and insightfully speed up the appearance of useful, comprehensive theory by spotlighting and gambling, if you will, on a few key elements. Matrix building is a conservative, but sure, strategy that will pay off in time if enough scholars persist. The alternative is a venturesome strategy that runs the risk of very small dividends on the investment made, but offers the excitement and allure of major breakthroughs.

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